

Monday, May 11, 2009

Agencies change in time of need

Economy prompts different approaches to meet growing demand for food, shelter

Catherine Jun / The Detroit News

Oak Park -- For more than a decade, Forgotten Harvest has dispatched its white diesel trucks to restaurants and grocery chains, picking up food for soup kitchens and shelters.

But beginning last year, donors have had to meet a new minimum on food weight to get a scheduled pickup: 100 pounds - double the previous minimum.

That's just one change Forgotten Harvest has implemented to meet higher food demand with minimal costs.

"As we increase internal distribution, our costs go higher," said Monica Cheik-Luoma, spokeswoman for Forgotten Harvest. "In order to be able to feed them, we have to be able to run efficiently."

With the sputtering economy decreasing corporate giving and leaving more families impoverished, agencies that provide emergency food and shelter are caught in the middle. Some prioritize immediate needs first, such as getting as much food to the hungry as possible. Others take the opposite tack: focusing on prevention programs to reduce the number of families who will need help.

"We're faced with assuring that the most needy, the most critical, are provided adequate services," said Paul Bridgewater, president and chief executive officer of the Detroit Area Agency on Aging.

Programs that assist seniors were already cash-strapped and now face additional funding losses. Last week, area programs lost \$1.1 million in state funding, the result of Gov. Jennifer Granholm's emergency order to pare the state budget.

That means Detroit Meals on Wheels and other programs will soon have to reduce staff visits with homebound clients, who were often helped by the staff with housekeeping or making meals -- anything to avoid cutting meal delivery to its current roster of 4,000 seniors a day, Bridgewater said.

But, Bridgewater said, that list will shrink: If someone dies or moves into a nursing home, the agency won't be able to afford to add new clients, despite a waiting list that has now grown to 690.

"It's one of those tragic situations (where) they're not waiting in line, but they are waiting in line to get a meal," he said.

Agencies that provide basic needs are getting a bigger portion of the charitable giving pie; a third of human service agencies surveyed reported more money in 2008, compared to a fifth of arts organizations, according to the Michigan Nonprofit Association.

This happens whenever the economy takes a nosedive, forcing households to direct their limited charitable dollars to the direst of causes.

"We've seen huge changes in the economy of giving in the last six months," said Kyle Caldwell, president and CEO of the Michigan Nonprofit Association. "People are philanthropically taking a deep examination of basic needs."

But it's these same organizations that people seek when in need of a safety net. And with more expected job loss and home foreclosures, already stretched agencies will eventually be overwhelmed, Caldwell said.

The South Oakland Shelter has turned away hundreds more homeless families this year than in previous ones, sending staffers hunting for additional congregations to help host them.

The greater demand has also inspired a new approach at the agency.

The shelter, based in Royal Oak, recently started a mentoring program for the children of parents staying there. Volunteers tutor children -- often while their parents are job-hunting -- and take them on excursions to places such as the Detroit Historical Museum.

"It definitely is a different approach," said Kevin Roach, executive director of the shelter. "If we can provide some strong intervention at some point in the child's life, we think we can ... free that child himself from that cycle of homelessness."

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